ACPP Daily Briefings

Week 30

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East and Horn of Africa:

Somalia: Somalia and the politics of famine

It has taken the spectre of famine in the Horn of Africa to temporarily wake the world up to the plight of Somalis. While Somalia is the epicentre of the crisis, the problem stretches to parts of Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti. An estimated 11.6 million people in total are said to be facing severe food shortages in the region. As the rallying cry for humanitarian intervention takes over, the question is whether the authorities in the countries concerned and the wider international community will follow through to find a lasting solution to this recurrent crisis. The Horn of Africa has been here before: 1992-93, 1999-2000, 2002-03, 2005-06 and 2008-09. How can one explain this long-standing sequence of disastrous famine? Is it a natural aberration or an output of the economic and political factors?

The Horn of Africa has in the last two years witnessed a cycle of drought with the current period being the driest in over 60 years. The harsh climatic conditions have destroyed the affected region’s last two harvests and resulted in substantial livestock migration and deaths. For Somalia, years of internal violence have contributed to the destruction of much of the means of production. This has been compounded by the inability of the international community to respond timely and appropriately to the current chronic situation and general dysfunctional nature of the Somali state, leaving many vulnerable and fundamentally weakened. To some experts, the situation has not been helped by climate change and according to this thesis the region needs to prepare for more droughts, which are likely to increase. Interestingly as early as November last year, there was ample warning that the Horn of Africa region was tinkering on the precipice. The international community, however, had to wait for BBC news reports to wake from its slumber and acknowledge the magnitude of the problem. There is a school of thought that some policymakers in rich countries are quite sceptical about taking preventative measures because they believe that aid agencies are often inflating problems.

It was not until 20 July that the UN officially declared a famine in Southern Somalia’s two regions of Bakool and Lower Shabelle - ironically the country’s biggest food-growing areas. This was the first time in nearly 30 years that the UN has declared a famine and it animated the semantics of humanitarian intervention. Sheikh Ali Mohamud Rage, the spokesperson of Al-Shabaab, came out arguing that the UN’s declaration of famine in southern Somalia was wrong and formed part of the ‘international community’s baseless propaganda’. The group presents itself as a ‘grassroots movement’ fighting the cause of Somali nationalism and Islam, but many others see it as a terrorist organisation using the name of Islam and that it has links with the Al-Qaeda terrorist group. Rage maintained that there was drought but that the conditions were not as bad as the UN was making them out to be. To him the term famine was being employed for political reasons - emotively to paint Al-Shabaab in a bad light and undermine its ‘legitimacy’, given that most of the affected areas were under its control. Al-Shabaab is, however, not a cohesive unit and it was not clear whether other members of the group shared Rage’s views.

There is no consensus about what constitutes famine. Under international law there is no mandated response that must follow from an official declaration of famine. However, it was hoped that the declaration, in this case with UN agencies seeking an estimated $2 billion in aid for the humanitarian response, would serve as a wake-up call to the international community. On 20 July at the UN Security Council Stakeout on the Humanitarian Situation in the Horn of Africa, the Somali situation continued to strike at the politics of humanitarian intervention. The United States Permanent Representative to the UN, Susan Rice, maintained that Al-Shabaab was principally responsible for exacerbating the consequences of the drought situation by
preventing its own people from being able to access critically needed assistance. This was in reference to the group’s decision a while back to ban organisations including Care, the International Medical Corps, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Food Programme (WFP) from operating in the areas under its control. Al-Shabaab had signalled in early July that it would accept aid groups but changed its course a few days later, insisting that groups like WFP were not welcome. It would appear that Al-Shabaab’s initial decision to admit external aid agencies was motivated by the fear that it could loose support and legitimacy in the areas it controls. But the group’s revision of this position could be explained by its suspicions that some countries that view them as terrorists might infiltrate humanitarian organisations with their intelligence services and gather ‘sensitive information’ about them. But a select number of organisations such UNICEF had been allowed to supply emergency nutrition supplies and water-related equipment to parts of Somalia under Al-Shabaab’s control, including Baidoa and the Bay region.

Meanwhile, the move to provide humanitarian assistance in Al-Shaabab areas has been met with concerns that it would strengthen the group. Ambassador Rice, for instance, insinuated in her remarks that Al- Shabaab was bent on looting aid shipments for its own ends. So far, however, there has been no evidence to support this assertion and it is possible that the lack of attacks on aid deliveries, particular from Al-Shabaab, is due to the group’s awareness this this might turn people against them or that it is not in adherence with some Islamic principles.

As rates of malnutrition and related deaths reach alarming levels, the Somali situation has certainly brought to the fore the politics and challenges of the humanitarian aid system, which is geared toward responding to signals. In the current situation, the humanitarian intervention has been helpful but so far incapable of responding adequately and on time. Again this underscores the need to find a lasting political solution to the Somali crisis, which must be inclusive in order to be accepted to the majority of Somalis. The alternative is chaos. The problem is that regionally and internationally, many see and respond to Somalia largely in terms of real or perceived threats to their own national interests and security.

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